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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Peer Culture Development, Inc., a private, non-profit agency which provides a school-based delinquency prevention program to public schools. The basic components of the program are described along with the selection and role of student leaders in the program. The dynamics of the group meetings are discussed and seven objectives that must occur if project goals are to be achieved are outlined, including reduction of negative peer pressure and increase in student involvement in school activities. Strategies to alter the subculture socialization process and to assist schools in helping students adapt to the environment are enumerated. Teacher training aspects of the program are also discussed. (JAC)

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PEER CULTURE DEVELOPMENT

A SCHOOL-BASED DELINQUENCY PREVENTION PROGRAM

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Peer Culture Development, Inc. is a private, non-profit agency which provides a school-based delinquency prevention program to public schools.

The purpose of Peer Culture Development, Inc. (PCD), as stated in its by-laws, is "to develop a peer group process using natural leaders to help resolve problems of school and community." By utilizing these natural leaders, PCD attempts to harness the tremendous innate power within young people to influence each other. Since the power of peers is widely recognized, the concept is sound at the start. Through guiding and teaching the young people how to relate to and deal with their problems and others', the program proposes to bring "significant others" to bear on student problems.

PCD has been developed from Positive Peer Culture[1] programs, which have been employed for some years in juvenile institutions across the country. The basic components upon which PCD is founded are:

1. Power of Peers - It is common knowledge that the influence of the peer group is a major determinant of adolescent behavior. PCD recognizes this fact and utilizes the power of the peer group to bring about positive behavior change.

2. The Reward of Giving - Human beings derive a great amount of their self concept through being of service to others. "In order to feel worthy, I must perceive myself to be worthy in the eyes of others." PCD views this principle as of primary importance in behavior and "value system" change.

3. The Strength of the Reformed - when a person with problems solves his problems, his power to help others is enhanced greatly. Thus, a young person may work through a problem and apply that insight and strength to similar problems of others.

The fundamental issues which are resolved through PCD have to do with the atmosphere in which the program functions:

1. Trust and Openness vs. Confrontation and Exposure - though the program is very confrontive at times, no part of the helping process is attempted until and unless the recipient has reached an adequate trust level with the group. In the school setting, this is more often easily done due to the fact that many students already know and trust each other. In addition, confidentiality is continually stressed as being of utmost importance to the group meeting.

2. A Climate of Change - due again to peer pressure, it is difficult for change to take place outside of a climate which is conducive to change. Therefore, it is necessary to develop this climate throughout the school through the effective use of the groups. When reached, this climate of change is evidenced when young people say to one another, "I don't want you to cut your class because I don't want you to fail," or "Don't do that because we don't want you to get suspended" or "Can't we solve this without you getting hurt?"

3. The Problem of the Here and Now - the program deals with the here and now in order to allow a positive behavior and "value system" change. PCD believes that most people's problems are not aided by delving into the past (as a major treatment goal). Therefore, the groups concentrate on what is happening now. This adds personal responsibility to behavior, rather than merely labeling it as a result of long or short term negative relationships, environmental handicaps or familial problems. Thus, the groups can say, "Yes, you had it bad, but why do you still persist in being a failure?"

With these principles and issues in mind, PCD professional staff members, called group leaders, are deployed to given schools to implement the program. At the schools, the initial tasks of the PCD group leaders involve orienting the school staff and students to the PCD program and selecting students for participation in the program.

Students are selected for participation for one or two reasons:

a) They are deemed to be potential problem students who are in need of help.

b) They are selected for leadership potential (positive or negative) and influence within the student body.

This enables the program to become accepted by a wider percentage of the student body. In addition, it prevents the program from being identified as a place for "bad students" or "crazy students." Thus, by populating the PCD groups with some positively oriented leaders, we not only get that positive input into group discussions, but we also help create the image of the program as a place where any student can go to receive help with a problem or learn how to make responsible decisions that affect his life.

After identifying students according to the aforementioned criteria, PCD group leaders organize these students into a number of heterogeneous peer groups. Heterogeneity here refers to race, grade level and academic ability, as well as the various behavior characteristics, as mentioned above. In effect, PCD attempts to duplicate a cross section of the student body within each peer group. This is mandatory for preventing labeling and stereotyping of students and has always been our Agency practice. However, the majority of the group meetings are conducted with members of the same sex. This allows more freedom of expression, especially with the macho inner city youth who would have difficulty admitting that he is in trouble because he "shows off" to prove his manhood. In addition, this allows extremely personal problems to be brought up without the embarrassment of discussing them in front of members of the opposite sex.

Groups are composed of 12-15 students who are assigned to the class for one semester (usually) and given credit for the class. Groups meet 5 days a week, for a regular 40 minute period, and students are generally scheduled out of a study period in order to participate in the program.

In addition to these full-time participants, PCD hopes to impact upon a much greater percentage of the student body through the involvement of part-time group members. These students would be referred to the PCD program by

administrators, faculty or other students as a result of problems that have come to light through discussions with or observations of such students.

Within the group meetings, discussions can involve a wide range of adolescent problem behavior. Their purpose is to involve the students in a "peer group" which has the moral standing and ability to get "inside" the delinquent's behavior and get him to:

a. Answer and account for his behavior to his peers.

b. Help someone else who has the same or similar problems.

c. Structure, with the group, his new approach to resolving this and future problems.

d. Become a positive force in helping his friends change their delinquent "value systems."

PCD, Inc. believes that delinquent behavior evolves from social environments which limit positive youth development in the areas of social competence, sense of belonging and usefulness. Students who have little stake in achievement in schools, and in conformity to the rules of conventional schools, often become alienated. They are more likely to engage in delinquent activities, and are more likely to be unemployed.

Based on this theory, PCD, Inc. has outlined seven objectives that must occur if project goals are to be achieved.

1. Reduce negative peer pressure by altering the peer subculture.

2. Increase students' sense of duty, responsibility, and accountability for their own behavior.

3. Increase student involvement in making the decisions that affect their daily lives at school.

4. Increase students' belief in conventional rules and the extent to which they value schooling.

5. Increase student feelings of support from strong, caring adults and other students.

6. Increase student self-esteem.

7. Decrease fear for safety in and around the school.

With these objectives in mind, PCD, Inc. has planned strategies and interventions to alter the subcultural socialization process and to assist the school in helping students adapt to their environment.

In addition to the direct services that they provide students, PCD staff also engage in a considerable amount of teacher training. Some of this training is in the form of in-service workshops for existing school personnel. The purpose

of these workshops is to change how teachers perceive and relate to troubled and non-conforming youths in the daily routine of the regular school environment. Specifically, they are taught more responsive procedures and techniques for positive interactions with students.

Another form of teacher training used by PCD staff involves a select number of teachers from each target school in a highly structured, comprehensive approach to group dynamics and problem solving. Through this approach, teachers are actually trained to conduct peer groups on an ongoing schedule. By training teachers in this manner, PCD, Inc. is able to integrate the peer culture group program options into the regular school curriculum.

It should be noted here that the PCD program is not a panacea for every problem student in every school. However, when PCD works according to its philosophical and operational conditions, much can be accomplished. Ideally, the group process will engender among its members a "culture of caring." During the daily group meetings, students begin to genuinely care about each other and the general environment of the school. This attitude, frequently referred to as "tough caring," enables the group to defuse potential trouble and to provide support and constructive help for each of the other group members when problems arise. Prejudices can be reduced and barriers to communication transcended. It is at this point that PCD has reached its greatest potential and has become an extraordinarily valuable human relations process.

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